

# War and peace in the *Iliad* and Michael Longley

Oliver Taplin

The Belfast poet Michael Longley has turned persistently to Homer for inspiration. In each of his last three volumes, he has taken passages of the epic *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and turned them into short lyrics which become personal poems. There are often touches of Northern Irish dialect, and he subtly weaves in modern equivalences. In 'The Camp-fires', for example, he has the Trojans spending the night out 'in no man's land and the killing fields'; and in 'Ceasefire', based on the meeting of Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad*, he talks of Hector's body 'laid out in uniform'.

Longley's *The Weather in Japan*, published in 2000, won the T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize (over his old friend and rival Seamus Heaney); and I have been wondering whether his next volume would include any more Homeric poems. Now we know: it is to be published in Spring 2004, and its title 'Snow Water' is taken from the poem that he and I discussed in our radio programme. It is, in effect, a translation of a famous passage of *Iliad* 22, and is so close to the original that there is no need to copy out another translation.

## Round the walls of Troy

Hector, confronted by the terrifying reality of Achilles in his dazzling armour, runs away from him round the walls of Troy. Eventually after three circuits the goddess Athena deceives Hector into standing and fighting; and the place that she does this is beside the double springs of the river Scamander (lines 208ff.). Michael Longley has taken the lines, from 139 to 156, where these springs are first described, and has called his poem 'War and Peace':

*Achilles hunts down Hector like a sparrowhawk  
Screeching after a horror-struck collared-dove  
That flails just in front of her executioner, so  
Hector strains under the walls of Troy to stay alive.  
Past the windbent wild fig tree and the lookout  
Post they both accelerate away from the town  
Along a cart-track as far as double well-heads  
That gush into the eddying Scamander, in one  
Warm water steaming like smoke from a bonfire,  
The other running cold as hailstones, snow water,  
Handy for the laundry-cisterns carved out of stone  
Where Trojan housewives and their pretty daughters  
Used to rinse glistening clothes in the good old days,  
On washdays before the Greek soldiers came to Troy.*

He described this as 'a fourteen-line unrhymed sonnet': it translates eighteen lines of the *Iliad*, and sticks pretty closely to them. Yet it is, he insisted, 'an exploration to reach an original poem'. What he does here, as in all his Homer poems, is to distil the epic into lyric, to frame a miniature picture within the vast canvas of the original. In his own phrase he 'goes against the page-turning flow' of Homer and 'freeze-frames' something which has particular significance for him.

## Juxtaposing different worlds

What is important here is closely related to the place of the simi-

les in the *Iliad*. One of the reasons that they are so effective is that they bring in vivid pictures of another world, a world that is familiar to listeners and readers, a world that is not distant or remote in the era and setting of a great heroic war. The similes work by being different from the world they are compared to as much as they are similar to it; and they draw the listener into the poem through the lure of being familiar and – often – beautiful. And many similes belong explicitly to the world of peace, of wild nature or agriculture or craftsmanship or domestic life. They are glimpses of peace within a world of war.

And this juxtaposition, says Michael Longley, is what drew him to the laundry-cisterns of Troy: they epitomised military disruption in a domestic context. It made him think, he said, of pictures in the newspapers of armoured vehicles in the high street of towns in Bosnia – and, indeed, of Belfast. There was one picture he had seen of a tank drawn up outside a dry cleaners. And when he had read this poem recently to an audience in Belfast that had been made up largely of Republicans, some of them had thought that, whether he had consciously meant it or not, the 'good old days'... 'before the Greek soldiers came to Troy' had to refer to the times in Belfast before the British troops moved in.

Michael Longley has a special way of turning the world of the *Iliad* to an angle where you can see that it is also our own everyday world, the world outside your own front-door. In this poem this is achieved in the last four lines. After some images that are vivid but not particularly familiar – the sparrow-hawk (which apparently flies horizontally rather than diving down), the wind-bent wild fig tree – comes the hinge-word 'handy'. Then 'housewives', 'pretty', 'rinse', 'good old days' and 'washdays': this is a world that is down-to-earth yet not merely made squalid. And it is this that has been torn apart by war. Not only are there no washdays any more, all the fine clothing of Troy is soon going to go up in flames.

The *Iliad* is a poem whose whole direction moves inexorably towards death and dissolution, the end of fine men and of a fine city, leaving the women to a life of slavery. Whereas laundry, as Longley memorably put it, 'is renewal and continuity'. It is because the *Iliad* includes its glimpses of beauty and peace and renewal, despite its terrible tidal flow of mortality and destruction, that it remains such a rich poem for the poets of our times.

Oliver Taplin is an editor of *Omnibus* and teaches at Magdalen College Oxford.

Michael Longley himself writes: 'The trick is to work out when to begin and when to end. In the case of 'War & Peace' the sense of a sonnet-length poem emerging was part of the inspiration. I want my versions to stand on their own as independent lyrics that I can call my own. As with my other poems my translations have to feel like adventures. Although I know the narrative, in poetic terms I have no idea what is going to happen next. In this frantically climactic episode Homer unobtrusively reminds us of what war destroys. Within great masterpieces smaller works of art are waiting to be found.'